

Pleats and curves are needed when turning a flat piece of fabric into a three-dimensional face mask. Air needs to enter and then come out. As a choreographer, I had to learn to use a sewing machine. Now I remember the rules: the bobbin must “unwind counterclockwise,” drop the foot down before you begin; move the fabric under that ferocious needle with care, or your mask will be lumpy. These sewing rules are like my syllabus, containing details that are essential but insufficient. Creating a face mask out of a flat piece of fabric is like trying to create a real classroom or studio using Zoom.

For two months the Zoom interface faces have entered onto and disappeared from my screen like the Cheshire Cat. The experience has been paradoxically both bland and intense, with all of our mug shots arranged in a mathematically determined rectangular array that randomly repositions our images. The digital display of our “classroom” or “studio” is our own tea party. Moments of disjointed communication or even dancing can occur, but our bodies and voices are distorted, delayed, variable, and at times competing with each other. Who will speak? Who speaks next? The internet connections can cut out unexpectedly, sometimes disastrously for discussions or presentations. Our backgrounds and lighting sources are varied. Student work happens in a kitchen or a bedroom or a backyard. One could do a crossword puzzle while in the Zoom room and no one else would ever know. It is very easy for a student to just sit back. Any fears or shyness are fed and reinforced when they can (or must) self-mute and/or turn off the camera. Students can, without ceremony, simply drop out. Even when they are there, we can barely see them in an effort to take any measure of their engagement or states of mind or bodies.

I agree that the Zoom platform is “better than nothing” but we all know that better than nothing is saying very little. I hear that some of us have been successful on Zoom. However, while we each of us, and perhaps our students as well, need help negotiating the pandemic, we may be less able to manage in a two dimensional studio anymore than we can breathe through a two dimensional mask. Truthfully, the subject at hand, no matter how compelling, can at any time be upstaged by the larger truth, that of this pandemic; all of us are, to varying degrees, terrified. Covid-19 has flattened and muted many of us, some for good.

“The true teacher is ahead of the students only in that he has more to learn than they: namely, the letting learn.” (Heidegger) Our efforts to create an environment where learning can happen demand our awareness of each others’ presence, in a supportive classroom or studio, where, possibly, can be found the courage to fail. Hopefully, “the having of wonderful ideas” (Eleanor Duckworth) may miraculously occur. We try to create an environment for wonderful ideas, where students can discover the courage to make a mistake; those moments are dearly created and dearly treasured. In our actual classrooms and studios, three-

## Bobbins and Syllabi

dimensional relationships are built where we can hear each other breathe, and can sense the subtle clues from each other while we are engaged and immersed in a complicated experience. Some of the most extraordinary learning happens before a class, or after, in unscripted but important exchanges which are a challenge to discover in any digital environment. But here we are. Can we make this flat-screen digital approximation of education more three dimensional? What combination of pleats or special tools are available to us as teachers with these hard surfaces between us and other human beings? I know we will get better at this, for sure, because we have to. My face masks are looking less lumpy.

We are in Wonderland. The Duchess Coronavirus is powerful, random, and cruel. We fell fast down that unforeseen hole, and we can find no obvious or simple path out. Down here are strange creatures reminding us of folks up above; they seem not really themselves and we seem not really ourselves. We finagle bobbins and syllabi: we reach for skills we thought we had. Our best intentions and pleats unfold; collaborations and seams unravel; scissors and arguments dull; personalities and stitches entangle; internet outages and family members interrupt; threads and equanimity snap.

We have come to the end of our semester. Taking painful leave of our students' programmed images, we create a farewell Zoom time although the abrupt physical leave-taking actually occurred more than two months ago. We thread the needle. We look at and wave at the little camera hole in our computer while our other hand takes the cursor down toward the red letters spelling "end meeting." Perhaps future digital classrooms will enable more three-dimensional moments, and all of us can take several deep, glorious breaths. However, sitting at table with the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse, and the Cheshire Cat floating near by, the human sharing of our mutual passions can be frustratingly elusive. And the White Rabbit pulls us, breathless, through a nightmare landscape about which we can be certain of very little, and from which we desperately yearn to escape.

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